



Simon Lambert, Avon Bridges and Lewis Birch

AND THE WINNER IS...

2007 Toro Student of the Year winner, Avon Bridges, is over the moon about his achievement, as Melissa Toombs found out

As the competition reached its 18th year, the standard of Toro Student of the Year applicants seemed to have risen once again. It was up to the judges to make some tough decisions at this year's final and all competitors were commended for their hard work.

When I asked this year's winner what it was about greenkeeping that he loved, he replied, "I couldn't put my finger on exactly what it is about greenkeeping that appeals to me, I just know I love it and I'm good at it. It's one of the very few things that I'm very good at it. I just enjoy everyday. I like the variety of work that we do. Greenkeeping is a career that changes with the seasons, you never get bored of it."

I think that response is one with which every greenkeeper can identify - variety is the key!

Avon fell into greenkeeping. "I was rubbish at school, he said, "I left when I was 17 and when looking for a job I came across greenkeeping. My father was a greenkeeper so I knew roughly what the job entailed from spending time with him as a kid."

Avon started his career in greenkeeping at Finchley Golf Club in 1997.

"Within two to three years the club had sent me to college and I discovered that I actually really enjoyed learning more about greenkeeping and it was something I was good at it."

Having completed his studies at Oaklands College, Avon speaks very highly of his Tutor, Andy Wight, "He was one of those rare tutors that doesn't just stand there telling you what you need to know, he always managed to teach you without you realising you were learning. It's been a privilege working with Andy; he's been immensely supportive,

particularly during my NVQ 2 and 3. I've never had a tutor or teacher that's more like a friend than a tutor. He is one of the best tutors in the country as far as I'm concerned," continued Avon.

You could say golf is in Avon's blood, as every family member involved in the sport seems to have fallen in to it. "My grandfather was a professional golfer and my father a greenkeeper but neither of them by intention," continued Avon.

Starting off as a Trainee at Finchley, Avon worked his way up through the ranks, and within nine years, went from knowing next to nothing to taking the position of Head Greenkeeper at Luton Hoo Golf Club, an 18 hole golf course with breathtaking parkland views in Bedfordshire, just over a year ago.

"Finchley have always been eager to get people into college, the team have always been very supportive and the now Head Greenkeeper (Craig Newton), has always encouraged me to learn." Avon recalls when he was offered his post at Luton Hoo, a luxury five-star hotel with an 18 hole golf course, and more than 1,000 acres of parkland and gardens, and how he worried that Craig would be upset that he was leaving,

"I had quite an important part to play in our team, I did most of the spraying and key jobs. I thought Craig would say he really didn't want to lose me but actually he was really pleased to have one of his team, he had trained from the age of 17, to be moving on to become a Head Greenkeeper. He was extremely supportive and I still speak to him regularly. He gives me a lot of advice, although we have actually reached the point where we now give each other advice," laughed Avon.

Clearly holding Finchley GC in high regard, Avon mentioned how the club had built up friendships with other golf clubs in their locality, visiting

each other's courses and sharing equipment.

"Within the next year or so I'd like to achieve that where I am now," said an enthusiastic Avon, who admits he, "doesn't play golf very well."

Barbara, Avon's wife, is expecting their first child this December.

"Having a baby reinforces to me why I'm doing what I'm doing. By becoming a Head Greenkeeper I am getting rewards for my 10 years of hard work in the trade. Barbara says I'm more alive now than I have been for years, because my mind is active all the time."

The past year has been hard work for Avon but he seems to thrive on the challenges that being a Head Greenkeeper presents.

"It took me a good six months to get used to the pressure of being a Head Greenkeeper and it's taken me 11 months to get used to the position."

The role of HG is not an easy one, Avon has had the added pressure of getting a team together and a new course construction.

"Stress and pressure are sometimes a good thing as they stop you from just getting on and doing the same old thing each day," said Avon.

Aged just 27, Avon is quite a young Head Greenkeeper.

"Most people walk up to my Deputy, who is in his thirties, and shake his hand as Head Greenkeeper which I quite enjoy - I like surprising people!"

Over the moon at being crowned Toro Student of the Year 2007, Avon can't wait to go to America,

"Having only worked at two golf clubs, I haven't experienced much variety in greenkeeping. I'm looking forward to being shown different ideas, how to look at things differently, and studying within a different college culture. I'm grateful to Finchley for all they have shown me but I do need to expand on my knowledge. I think this country is moving over to the American way of thinking about greenkeeping so it will be good to get a head start!"

Looking to the future, Avon has his hands full at Luton Hoo for the next few years, building up its reputation and working with local golf clubs to ensure they compliment each other rather than compete.

"Our Course Designer, Mike Smith, has gone beyond his call of duty and acted a mentor to me during my steep learning curve at Luton Hoo," said Avon, with a positive outlook for the years ahead.

